DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 510 IR 017 663

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TITLE The Appearance of Gender in Award-Winning Children's Books.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 11p.; In: Eyes on the Future: Converging Images, Ideas, and Instruction. Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (27th, Chicago, IL, October 18-22, 1995); see IR 017 629.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Awards; *Books; *Characterization; Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Literature; Females; Fiction; Sex Bias; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS *Caldecott Award; Gender Issues; Visual Imagery

ABSTRACT

The likelihood that books can shape children's gender role attitudes and transmit gender role stereotypes increases the need for non-sexist children's literature. This paper explores the appearance of gender in Caldecott Award winning children's books. Picture books, trade books, content books and basal readers were inspected in the 1970s for the appearance of sexism; researchers found ample evidence of sexual bias in these materials. Male characters were depicted more often than female characters and both genders were shown in traditional, stereotyped roles. In the 1980s several studies examined children's books which were published since the original research to determine whether any changes had taken place in the number of female characters or in the manner in which they were represented. A higher percentage of female images was found in the 1980s than in the 1970s; however, the gender roles still reflected stereotypes. The books published between 1980 and 1995 share some traits of their earlier counterparts; male main characters still outnumber female main characters, but only slightly. Most of the female main characters in recent literature are portrayed in a non stereotyped fashion. Another difference is the deviation from stereotyped character portrayals in folktales. Criteria for parents/educators to evaluate children's books and a list of the Caldecott Award winning books and honor books for 1981-95 are included. (Contains 16 references.) (AEF)

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The Appearance of Gender in Award-winning Children's Books

by Anne Drolett Creany

ED 391 510

Gender is one of the most influential facets of human development. It affects each individual's sense of identity, interactions with others and place in society. Moments after birth, a child is labeled according to gender. As children develop, they begin to apply gender labels to themselves and also to others. Through such labeling, children begin to formulate a sense of their own gender identity. Through a process known as sex typing, a child begins to acquire the self concepts, behaviors and preferences which society defines as appropriate for members of a given gender. Those culturally determined preferences, attitudes and behaviors are referred to as sex roles, or, gender roles. When gender roles become rigid prescriptions for gender-linked behaviors, they are known as gender role stereotypes.

Gender role stereotypes act as limits to children's potential growth and development. Boys and girls may deny or suppress natural inclinations if they believe that those inclinations would make them appear unmasculine or unfeminine. Children may restrict their interests and experiences to those deemed appropriate for their particular gender by the dominant culture.

Many psychologists and sociologists agree that children assimilate gender role stereotypes through a process of socialization. Socialization is the method by which society conveys behavioral expectations to its members. (Hyde, 1986). Many socializing agents play a part in the transmission of gender role stereotypes. Parents are the first, and one of the most influential, socializing agents (Block, 1983). Peers also exert a strong influence on the assumption of gender role stereotypes. The media, especially television, has been shown to perpetuate gender stereotypes (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1984; O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, 1978). Likewise, children's textbooks and tradebooks reflect the gender stereotypes of the culture.

Social-learning theorists note that books are important socializing agents (Mischel, 1970). Weitzman (1972) stated that picture books significantly affect early sex-role socialization because they present societal values to young children. Books are a window to the outside world, showing children how other boys and girls think, act and feel. Children also find role models in books who represent what children can and should be in their adult lives. Jalongo (1988) notes that literature is a potent force in children's lives.

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influencing the formation of their ideas and expectations. Literacy materials can affect children's attitudes not only about themselves but also about others.

The likelihood that books can shape children's gender role attitudes and transmit gender role stereotypes increases the need for non-sexist children's literature. However, several studies revealed the existence of sexism in children's books. Picture books, trade books, content books and basal readers were inspected for evidence of sexism. Researchers found ample evidence of sexual bias in materials written for children. Male characters are not only depicted more often than female characters, both genders are also shown in traditional, stereotyped roles (Weitzman, 1972; Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979; Nilson, 1971). This paper will explore the appearance of gender in Caldecott Award winning picture books.

Sexism in Children's Books

Feminists on Children's Literature (1971) examined 49 Newbery Award winning books written for an elementary school age audience and found three male characters for every female. Nilson (1971) sampled 80 Caldecott Award winning picture books and Caldecott honor books published between 1950 and 1970. She concentrated on illustrated books because of their influence on young readers at an age when gender identity is forming. Nilson found that females were not only outnumbered by males but in six of the books, females were excluded. The percentage of girls portrayed in books actually fell from 46% in 1951-55 to 26% in 1966-70. Nilson acknowledges that her findings may be somewhat skewed since 19 of the 80 Caldecott books she reviewed were folktales which were created and recorded hundreds of years ago and usually depicted the exploits of men.

As she examined picture books, Nilson also noticed what she terms the "cult of the apron" (p. 918). Of 25 books picturing women, 21 showed a woman wearing an apron. Women were also illustrated as spectators of the action--looking out of windows and doorways or sitting on rockers on porches.

Weitzman et al. (1972) also noted the dearth of females in their study of 18 Caldecott Award winners and honor books from 1967-71. Even though women are 51% of the population, 23 women were pictured as opposed to 261 men. One third of the books these authors evaluated showed no women at all.

In further support of Nilson's findings, Weitzman et al. noted differentiated roles for boys and girls. Boys were independent, active, adventurous leaders, often depicted in outdoor settings. Girls, on the other hand, were passive, quiet and dependent, often depicted in indoor settings. These girls, and mothers too, were shown as anxious to please or help males. In fact, females often derived their status as the wives, mothers or daughters of important men.

Schubert (1980) examined 44 Caldecott Award winning books published between 1937 and 1980 for evidence of stereotyped roles. She limited her analysis to seven categories: 1) attractiveness as the basis for females' achievements; 2) limited aspirations and self-concept of females are accepted as the norm; 3) females, rather than males, show strong emotion; 4) females were frequently engaged in domestic duties which males did not perform; 5) males watch idly as women perform domestic duties; 6) males are shown in a wide range of occupations whereas women's occupations are very limited; and 7) only males perform brave, important deeds. Although Schubert's data are not complete enough to generalize her findings to the larger findings of picture books, she concludes that young children who are exposed to picture books receive significant reinforcement of gender role stereotypes.

Updated Analyses of Sexism in Children's Books

In the 1980's, several studies examined children's books which were published since the original research to determine whether any changes had taken place in the number of female characters or the manner in which they were represented. Engel (1981) evaluated Caldecott winner and honor books published between 1976-1980. This study showed only a slight decrease in male dominance (72%) when compared with the percentage of male characters in Caldecott and honor books published between 1966 and 1970 (74%) and 1971-1975 (78%). Engel tabulated the frequency of the encounters readers have with male and female characters in the belief that the total number of images encountered by the child reader carries more weight that just the number of the characters. Because children may get different impressions from reading the pictures alone, text alone, or a combination of the two, Engel performed separate counts for illustration and text as well as a total count for both.

Collins et al. (1984) also assessed Caldecott Award winners and honor books. Their sample included books published between 1979-1982. Compared to Weitzman's findings, this study showed that fewer sexist books are being written and that more women are appearing in titles, illustrations and major roles in children's picture books. Another update is provided by Williams et al. (1987) who examined 53 Caldecott Award winners and honor books published between 1972 and 1986. Williams found that females were significantly more visible in picture books but that males were still more likely to be portrayed. More images of females appeared in the illustrations but only one third of the central characters are female. Most of the male and female characters in this study played traditional gender roles. Williams et al. conclude that in the picture books of the early 1980s females are not stereotyped, only "colorless".

Dougherty and Engel (1987) provide another view of Caldecott Award winners and honor books published from 1981-1985. This inspection led the authors to

generalize that there is a tendency toward gender equality in picture books with males and females possessing nontraditional characteristics and playing nontraditional roles. This assertion is made despite the fact that the total number of male characters in the books studied was 206 to 153 female characters and the total number of male images was 3,063 to 1,832 female images.

Clearly, many researchers have chosen to evaluate Caldecott Award winner and honor books. Their analyses varied in methodology, the amount and type of statistics and in results. It seems reasonable to conclude, however, that the Caldecott award winning books of the 1980s offered a higher percentage of female images than did their counterparts of the 1970s. However, the gender roles played by male and female characters still reflected and thus transmitted traditional gender roles.

Are the Caldecott Award winning books published in the last decade any different? Are the roles played by males and females any more egalitarian?

Caldecott Award - winning Books Published Since 1980

Fifty-seven picture books have received the Caldecott Award or been named an honor book since 1980. (See Appendix A for a listing). Rather than relying completely upon a statistical frequency tabulation of male and female images, this analysis of gender portrayal will be somewhat holistic. Obviously, such an interpretation is weakened by its subjectivity. However, piecemeal evaluations which depend solely on male and female body counts are flawed because they may overlook the flavor and subtle nuances of a text and/or illustration.

The books published between 1980-1995 share some traits of their earlier counterparts. Male main characters still outnumber female main characters but only slightly. The main character in twenty of the books is a male; seventeen books feature female main characters.

An interesting increase in books which have both male and female figures as main characters was evident. Jumanji is an example of such a book (Van Allsburg, 1981). In this story, a brother and sister work together to complete the jungle board-game that has come to life in their living room. The sister assumes the leadership role in this dilemma.

Three of the recently published books were gender neutral, creating the possibility that readers may project whatever gender they deem appropriate on the characters. The child in In a Small, Small Pond (Fleming, 1993), the bird in Time Flies (Rohmann, 1994) and the shadow in Shadow (Brown, 1982) are all subject to speculation as to gender.

An interesting difference noted in the recent books is the portrayal of each gender. Most of the female main characters (n=17) are portrayed in a non stereotyped fashion. Only four females are portrayed as a female stereotype. Males (n=13), however, play

traditional active, adventurous roles for the most part; only six males played a non stereotyped role. Ten, Nine, Eight (Bang, 1983) is an example of the latter. In this counting book a father tenderly helps his daughter get ready for bed.

Another difference in recent Caldecott award winning books is evident in folktales. Seventeen of the fifty-seven Caldecott award winning books published since 1980 are folktales. This represents almost one-third of the books, a higher number than Nilson reported.

Folktales typically provide a traditional portrayal of males and females but several of the folktales examined here do not adhere to stereotyped portrayals. For example, the character of Magic Frog in The Story of Jumping Mouse (Steptoe, 1984) is a powerful figure who grants Jumping Mouse a gift which assists him in attaining his dream and ultimately rewards him for his courage and kindness to others. It is interesting to note that if this book was analyzed by a frequency count, we would see that Magic Frog, a female, is a secondary character who is out numbered by male characters at least 4-to-1 and would fail to recognize this as a nonsexist book. The character of Jumping Mouse is also a rather nontraditional male figure; he is a dreamer who is very empathic toward the plight of others.

Other folktales feature female main characters who do not fit the mold of passive girls who are rewarded for their beauty and their obedience. For example, in Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China (Young, 1989) the three sisters outwit the wolf themselves, in contrast to Grimms' version wherein the woodcutter rescues both grandmother and child.

Similarly, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, (Steptoe, 1988) is often described as an African Cinderella tale. In this story, the king's heart is won by the daughter who is kind and generous. Both daughters are beautiful; their temperaments set them apart. In the Creole tale, The Talking Eggs (Sans Souci, 1989), kindness, the keeping of promises and courage are rewarded with riches. There are no male characters in this book.

In fiction, as in folklore, female characters are less passive and inactive. The Grey Lady eludes the strawberry snatcher with determination, good humor and cleverness. (Bang, 1980). Cassie flies through the air in Tar Beach (Ringold, 1991), claiming the Brooklyn bridge for her own. The daughter of a migrant family helps her parents as they work in the fields in Working Cotton(Williams, 1992). In Mirette on the High Wire, (McCully, 1992) Mirette walks a tightrope stretched across a Parisian street. Interestingly, the artists depict the female characters in the above-mentioned books wearing dresses even though escaping, flying, working in fields and walking tightropes don't lend themselves to such clothing.

Clearly, more female characters in award-winning picture books are behaving actively and adventurously even if few male

characters are adopting traditional female traits. Perhaps the tendency to assign active, adventurous roles to both males and females substantiates the claim made by Bauer (1993) that current challenges to sexism frequently consist of choosing stories in which girls are not just "as good as" but actually "just like" boys. Bauer suggests that the female experience is equally valid and important and worth being taken seriously.

If, as Bauer suggests, balanced numbers of male and female characters and active roles played by both genders are not a sufficient indication of nonsexist literature for children, what criteria should parents/educators employ in evaluating books? Rudman (1995) proposes the following guidelines:

*characters should be individuals, consistent with their character development and the story's plot;

*occupations should be gender free;

*achievements should be judged independently of gender

*adults should function as parents and breadwinners in some stories

*clothing should be functional and appropriate

*females should not always be weaker or smaller

* language should be gender fair

Adults should not approach evaluation criteria or critical reviews of children's books as a rationale for preventing children's access to certain books. Instead, both children and adults should be invited to examine and discuss their own gender stereotypes. Care should be taken to provide a beautifully written and illustrated collection of literature which will offer a balanced representation of genders and gender behaviors and roles to serve as models for children.

Appendix A

Caldecott Award winning books and honor books

(*) Indicates books cited in paper

1981 Caldecott Award

Fables by Arnold Lobel. Harper.

Honor Books

The Bremen-Town Musicians retold and illustrated by Ilse Plume. Doubleday.

The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher by Molly Bang. Four Winds.*

Mice Twice by Joseph Low. Atheneum.

Truck by Donald Crews. Greenwillow.

1982 Caldecott Award

Jumanji by Chris Van Allsburg. Houghton Mifflin. *

Honor Books

A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers by Nancy Willard. Illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen. Harcourt Brace

Where the Buffaloes Begin by Olaf Baker. Illustrated by Stephen Gammell. Warne.

On Market Street by Arnold Lobel. Illustrated by Anita Lobel. Greenwillow.

Outside Over There by Maurice Sendak. Harper.

1983 Caldecott Award

Shadow by Blaise Cendrars. Translated and illustrated by Marcia Brown. Scribner's.*

Honor Books

When I Was Young in the Mountains by Cynthia Rylant. Illustrated by Diane Goode. Dutton.

A Chair for My Mother by Vera B. Williams. Greenwillow.

1984 Caldecott Award

The Glorious Flight: Across the Channel with Louis Bleriot, by Alice and Martin Provensen. Viking.

Honor Books

Ten, Nine, Eight by Molly Bang. Greenwillow. *

Little Red Riding Hood by the Brother's Grimm. Retold and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Holiday House. *

1985 Caldecott Award

Saint George and the Dragon adapted by Margaret Hodges. Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Little, Brown.

Honor Books

Hansel and Gretel adapted by Rika Lesser. Illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky, Dodd.

The Story of Jumping Mouse retold and illustrated by John Steptoe. Lothrop.*

Have You Seen My Duckling? by Nancy Tafuri. Greenwillow.

1986 Caldecott Award

The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg. Houghton Mifflin.

Honor Books

The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant. Illustrated by Stephen Gammell. Bradbury.

King Bidgood's in the Bathtub by Audrey Wood. Illustrated by Don Wood. Harcourt.

1987 Caldecott Award

Hey, Al by Arthur Yorinks. Illustrated by Richard Egielski. Farrar.

Honor Books

The Village of Round and Square Houses by Ann Grifalconi. Little, Brown.

Alphabatics by Suse MacDonald. Bradbury.

Rumplestiltskin by the Brother's Grimm. Retold and illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky. Dutton.

1988 Caldecott Award

Owl Moon by Jane Yolen. Illustrated by John Schoenherr. Philomel.

Honor Books

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters retold by John Steptoe. Lothrop. *

1989 Caldecott Award

Song and Dance Man by Karen Ackerman. Illustrated by Stephen Gammell. Knopf.

Honor Books

Free Fall by David Wiesner. Lothrop.

Goldilocks and the Three Bears retold and illustrated by James Marshall. Dial.

Mirandy and Brother Wind by Patricia McKissack. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Knopf.

The Boy of the Three-Year Nap by Diane Snyder. Illustrated by Allen Say. Houghton Mifflin.

1990 Caldecott Award

Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China translated and illustrated by Ed Young. Philomel. *

Honor Books

Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins by Eric Kimmel. Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Holiday House.

The Talking Eggs adapted by Robert D. San Souci. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Dial. *

Bill Peet: An Autobiography by Bill Peet. Houghton Mifflin.

Color Zoo by Lois Ehlert. Lippincott.

1991 Caldecott Award

Black and White by David Macaulay. Houghton Mifflin.

Honor Books

Puss'n Boots by Charles Perrault. Illustrated by Fred Marcellino. Farrar.

"More, More, More," Said the Baby: 3 Love Stories by Vera B. Williams. Greenwillow.

1992 Caldecott Award

Tuesday by David Wiesner. Clarion.

Honor Books

Tar Beach by Faith Ringgold. Crown.*

1993 Caldecott Award

Mirette on the High Wire by Emily Arnold McCully. Putnam. *

Honor Books

Seven Blind Mice by Ed Young. Philomel.

The Stinky Cheese Man & Other Fairly Stupid Tales by Jon Scieszka. Illustrated by Lane Smith. Viking.

Working Cotton by Sherley Anne Williams. Illustrated by Carole Byard. Harcourt. *

1994 Caldecott Award

Grandfather's Journey by Allen Say. Houghton Mifflin.

Honor Books

Peppe the Lamplighter by Elisa Bartone. Illustrated by Ted Lewin. Lothrop.

In the Small, Small Pond by Denise Fleming. Holt. *.

Owen by Kevin Henkes. Greenwillow.

Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest by Gerald McDermott. Harcourt.

Yo! Yes? by Chris Raschka. Orchard

1995 Caldecott Award

Smoky Night by Eve Bunting. Illustrated by David Diaz. Harcourt.

Honor Books

Swamp Angel by Anne Isaacs. Illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky. Dutton.

John Henry by Julius Lester. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Dial.

Time Flies by Eric Rohmann. Crown.

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